



## **SPECIAL CABINET – 12<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2025**

**SUBJECT: PONTLLANFRAITH LEISURE CENTRE**

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To advise Cabinet on the outcome of a legal challenge to the decision taken by Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024 that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre would remain permanently closed
- 1.2 To seek Cabinet approval for the indoor facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre to remain permanently closed, with sporting facilities at the adjacent Y Cwmpawd, Pontllanfraith (Centre for Vulnerable Learners) including a 4-court sports hall, changing facilities, and a 3G pitch being made available for community use outside of school hours upon opening in Summer 2025. Cabinet approval is also sought for the use of the 3G pitch on the Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre site to cease once the 3G pitch at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL) is open for community use.

### **2. SUMMARY**

- 2.1 In 2018, the Council adopted a Sport and Active Recreation Strategy for the period 2019-2029. The vision for sport and active recreation is “to encourage healthy lifestyles and support our residents to be “more active, more often”. The strategy references poor levels of health in certain areas of the county; reducing budgets; the large number of ageing facilities across the county and the deteriorating quality of our older buildings as well as increasing population and consumer demand as some of the key challenges it is seeking to overcome. The strategy also references the need to maximise the impact of all sport and recreation facilities.
- 2.2 Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is now nearly 50 years old. The building has a significant maintenance backlog, and the associated 3G football pitch is at the end of its lifespan. The indoor leisure space at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020 and, apart

from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, has not re-opened for leisure use. The annual revenue budget for Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch is £181,573.

- 2.3 The Leisure Centre formerly operated as a shared joint - use site with the adjacent Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School which closed in 2016. The construction of a Centre for Vulnerable Learners is currently in progress on the school site under the Council's Sustainable Communities for Learning programme. The sporting facilities at the new Centre are due for completion in Summer 2025 and will include a 4-court sports hall, with associated changing facilities and a 3G pitch (size 40 x 30 metres i.e. not full size) available for community use outside of school hours. Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners are included at Appendix 1.
- 2.4 Islwyn High School opened in June 2017 to replace the existing Pontllanfraith and Oakdale Comprehensive Schools and includes a 4-court sports hall and dual use 3G football and rugby pitch. A new dual use 3G pitch opened at Blackwood Comprehensive School in 2020. In 2021 the existing Artificial Turf Pitches (ATP) at both Lewis School, Pengam and Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys were upgraded to dual use 3G pitches and support community use. The Council is continuing to develop the 3G pitch provision in the county borough with additional facilities at both Abercarn Primary School and St Cenydd Comprehensive School and Leisure Centre, further supported by upgrading the outdated Artificial Turf Pitch (ATP) at Risca Leisure Centre to a dual use 3G pitch.
- 2.5 Closing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and the associated 3G pitch permanently is consistent with the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy and the Mobilising Team Caerphilly principle of doing things differently. The case for closure is made in view of the need to invest significantly in the existing facilities to sustain their use, let alone bring them up to current standards, when there are new, alternate, and modern facilities available on the adjacent site and nearby. Additionally, these modern alternate facilities can be operated far more efficiently than the existing Leisure Centre as they are located on joint use sites with schools.
- 2.6 On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024 Cabinet considered a report on the outcome of a public consultation together with the views of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee and resolved that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre would remain closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch would cease once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. A legal challenge was brought against this decision of Cabinet on 6 Grounds. The Claimant only had to succeed on one of the six grounds for the decision to be quashed. The Council conceded that one of the grounds relating to the treatment of a call-in request was more likely to succeed than fail and agreed that the decision challenged should be quashed on this ground only, while making no concession on the other grounds raised. The Council adopted a pragmatic approach to concede the claim and avoid the delay and cost of a contested hearing. As a result of the decision of Cabinet being quashed a report was presented to Scrutiny Committee for further consideration of the proposal

that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed ahead of this further report being presented to Cabinet for decision. The comments of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee are included at 10.5 below.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 That the Cabinet note the outcome of the legal challenge to the decision of Cabinet made on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024 in relation to Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre.
- 3.2 That Cabinet consider the outcome of the consultation exercise and the comments of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee at 10.5 below.
- 3.3 That Cabinet approves the permanent closure of the indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre.
- 3.4 That Cabinet approves the permanent closure of the 3G pitch on the Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre site once the 3G pitch at the adjacent Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.

### **4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 To support the agreed Outcomes in the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy of:
  - Better Health
  - Healthier and Prosperous Communities
  - Securing a more efficient and financially sustainable future offer
- 4.2 The indoor leisure facilities have been closed for the last 5 years.

### **5. THE REPORT**

- 5.1 Caerphilly Council operates more leisure centres than any other Local Authority in Wales. The Council's Sport and Leisure service employs approximately 250 staff and has a net budget of circa £4.2 million. In 2018 the Council adopted a Sport and Active Recreation Strategy (SARS) for the period 2019-2029. The Vision for sport and active recreation is "to encourage healthy lifestyles and support our residents to be "more active, more often". The implementation of the Strategy encompasses a range of activity which supports the Corporate Plan and in particular Well-being Objective 3 - Enabling our Communities to be Inclusive as well as the Council's broader Placeshaping plans.
- 5.2 The Strategy references poor levels of health in certain areas of the county; reducing budgets; the large number of ageing facilities across the county and the deteriorating quality of our older buildings as well as increasing population and consumer demand as some of the key challenges it is seeking to overcome. The strategy also references the need to maximise the impact of all sport and recreation facilities.

5.3 Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre opened in 1975 and its facilities include a five-court sports hall, two squash courts, small fitness suite, small multi-purpose dance studio and a 3G football pitch.

5.4 Now 50 years old, Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre has a maintenance backlog estimated at £476,159 based on a condition survey undertaken in 2019. Using our most recent cost estimates the backlog maintenance works are estimated to total £736,552. This does not take into account any adaptations which took place in connection to the mass vaccination centre, further deterioration since 2019 or recommissioning costs of the building. The costs below display the total forecast expenditure needed for the whole property based on the condition survey dated 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019. The costs are totalled by priority 1,2 and 3 to indicate the urgency of the work required (where 1 is the most urgent):

**Priority 1 £3,853** – Urgent work that will prevent immediate closure of premises and/or address an immediate high risk to the health and safety of occupants and/or remedy a serious breach of legislation.

**Priority 2 £202,672** – Essential work required within two years that will prevent serious deterioration of the fabric or services and/or address a medium/high risk to the health and safety of occupants and/or remedy a less serious breach of legislation.

**Priority 3 £269,634** – Desirable work required within three to five years that will prevent deterioration of the fabric or services and/or address a low risk to the health and safety of occupants and/or remedy a minor breach of legislation

5.5 The 3G football pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was installed in 2011. The typical lifespan of a surface of this nature is 8 – 12 years depending upon use. In 2018/19 the last full operating year before the Covid-19 pandemic, the leisure centre site cost the Council £131,350 to operate. In that period there were 79,923 visits as shown in the table below

AREA	ADULT	JUNIOR	TOTAL
3G Pitch	25,900	24,184	50,084
Fitness Suite	6,729	1,361	8,090
Squash Courts	1,060	56	1,116
Holiday Camps	0	490	490
Sports Hall	10,633	5,137	15,770
Group Exercise	4,373	0	4,373
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48,695</b>	<b>31,228</b>	<b>79,923</b>

5.6 On 10th April 2019 Cabinet resolved to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and on 24th June 2019 the High Court quashed that decision. There were 5 grounds

of the Judicial Review and the Court dismissed 4, but did rule that there was insufficient evidence that Cabinet had properly discharged its duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. An Integrated Impact Assessment for this proposal has been undertaken, including full consideration of socio-economic duty as highlighted at Section 7. below.

- 5.7 A public consultation on the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed was undertaken from Monday 20 November 2023 to Wednesday 3 January 2024. The outcome of the consultation was presented to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024 and this, together with the comments from Scrutiny Committee were presented in a further report to Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024. Cabinet resolved that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre would remain closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch would cease once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use.
- 5.8 A legal challenge was brought against this decision of Cabinet on 6 Grounds. The Claimant only had to succeed on one of the six grounds for the decision to be quashed. The Council conceded that one of the grounds relating to the treatment of a call-in request was more likely to succeed than fail and agreed that the decision challenged should be quashed on this ground only, while making no concession on the other grounds raised. The circumstances giving rise to the call-in challenge were that following the Cabinet decision a call-in request was submitted by a Member of Scrutiny Committee which was supported by 3 other Members. Subsequently, and after the time for requesting a call-in had expired, two of the Members withdrew their support for the call-in and the Council proceeded on the basis that no valid call-in request had been received. It was claimed that the call-in request had been validly made and should have been considered. As already stated, the Council conceded this ground was more likely to succeed than fail and so adopted a pragmatic approach to concede the claim and avoid the delay and cost of a contested hearing. As a result of the decision of Cabinet being quashed a report was presented to Scrutiny Committee for further consideration of the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed ahead of this further report being presented to Cabinet for decision. The comments of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee are included at 10.5 below.
- 5.9 The indoor leisure space at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was closed as a result of the UK national lockdown in March 2020 and, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, has not re-opened for leisure use. Between September 2021 and June 2023, it was used by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board as a Mass Vaccination Centre to replace Newbridge Leisure Centre. All previous block bookings of the indoor sport and leisure space have relocated to other facilities across the county borough such as Oakdale Badminton Club at Islwyn High School for example.
- 5.10 The Leisure Centre formerly operated as a shared joint-use site with the adjacent Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School which closed in 2016. Under the Sustainable Communities for Learning programme the Council is developing a Centre for Vulnerable Learners on the former school site. Due for completion in

Autumn 2025 the new facility will accommodate between 80 - 120 pupils and will be equipped with high quality learning opportunities, indoor and outdoor sporting provision as well as access to first class support and will enable community use of the facilities outside of school hours. Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners are included at Appendix 1.

- 5.11 The sporting facilities at the new Centre are due for completion in Summer 2025 and will include a 4-court sports hall, with changing facilities, and a 3G pitch (size 40 x 30 metres i.e. not full size). The sports hall will have a minimum ceiling height clear of any obstructions of 7.5 metres accommodating at least the Club Standard for Badminton Basketball Netball and Volleyball. Parking spaces and Electric Vehicle (EV) charging points will be available to the public outside of school times. There will be a Joint User agreement between Sport & Leisure Services and the Centre for Vulnerable Learners, with the out of hours usage of the facilities managed by Sport & Leisure ensuring appropriate community use. The new 3G will support training provision but not competitive fixtures - although these can be played at Islwyn High, or Blackwood Comprehensive school.
- 5.12 The existing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre sports hall is x 5-court (so a reduction of 1 court). The majority of sports halls across the county borough are x 4 courts. The sizes of both facilities are set out below:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre Sports Hall (5 Court)</b>	<b>CVL Sports Hall (4 Court)</b>
Overall Width	17912mm	18250mm
Overall Length	36000mm	34730mm
Wall to Badminton Court Baseline	2260mm / 2300mm	2425mm / 2425mm
Between Parallel Badminton Courts	Varies (Min being 750mm)	2000mm
Wall from Side-line of Badminton Court	Varies (Approx. 1000mm)	2165mm

In summary, the CVL is marginally wider, but slightly shorter than the existing sports hall at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre, however this is negligible given the move from a 5 to 4 badminton courts hall.

- 5.13 The CVL will not include a fitness suite, squash courts or dance studio, but there has been significant investment in the Fitness Suite at Newbridge Leisure Centre along with a smaller but targeted investment at Heolddu Leisure Centre in both the Fitness Suite and Squash Court. The Sports Hall in the CVL is multi-purpose and as such can accommodate aspects of provision that the Dance Studio previously offered and provided. Also, a new Dance and Group Cycling

Studio were provided as part of the Newbridge Leisure Centre Fitness Suite project. It should also be noted that there are a number of private sector fitness suite providers within the local area offering a variety of options.

- 5.14 Use of the outdoor 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre recommenced on a phased basis in April 2021 without access to the changing rooms, supported by the Covid 19 re-opening plan. The full size 3G pitch is well used and in 2023/24, there were 31,884 visits as shown in the table below:

AREA	ADULT	JUNIOR	TOTAL
3G Pitch Hire	11,499	20,385	31,884

- 5.15 The 3G pitch has been the subject of ongoing repairs for some time. An inspection report produced in 2022 confirmed that the condition of the pitch is as to be expected given its age and intense usage (particularly the usage level when the former Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School was open) and that it is nearing the end of its lifespan. Any further repairs undertaken would only provide a short-term benefit and replacement must be considered. Replacement costs are approximately £280,000, although this does not include a review of the current 30 year old substructure that will require investigation to ensure that the integrity has not been compromised.
- 5.16 Islwyn High School is 3 miles away and opened in June 2017 to replace the existing Pontllanfraith and Oakdale Comprehensive Schools and includes a dual use 3G football and rugby pitch and 4-court Sports Hall. A dual use 3G pitch was also installed at Blackwood Comprehensive School and opened for use in 2020. In contrast to the single use, football only, 3G pitch provision at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre, the 3G pitches at Blackwood Comprehensive School and Islwyn High School are capable of being used for both football and rugby (with resultant FAW and IRB approval).
- 5.17 The current 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is one of the few pitches that meets the standard for Gwent County matches. The 3G pitches at Islwyn High School and Blackwood Comprehensive School do not currently meet that standard. However, Welsh League Reserve fixtures have been played at the Blackwood Comprehensive School 3G pitch this season along with FAW Academy fixtures over the past year. The county borough has six Gwent County level teams, and all of these teams play at their own local facility and have not expressed a desire to make any 3G their 'permanent' home. Should these teams aim to move through the league tiers then the options to support them in this would be discussed and explored.
- 5.18 It should also be noted that recent investment has taken place at both Lewis School, Pengam and Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys in relation to upgrading the existing Artificial Turf Pitches (ATP) to dual use Rugby and Football 3G pitches. The allocation of bookings at these facilities is undertaken in collaboration with the host school and Sport & Leisure Services. The sport and community facilities at both Islwyn High and Blackwood Comprehensive School are delivering full community programmes and in December 2023 the

management of the 3G pitch and sports hall at Islwyn High school was transferred to Sport and Leisure Services and is now available for weekend and evening bookings. In a further improvement to existing facilities the 3G pitch at Newbridge Leisure Centre was renewed in 2024. The Council is developing further 3G pitch provision in the county borough with work currently in progress to install new 3G pitches at Risca and St Cenydd Leisure Centres. This is further supported by the recent completion of a floodlit 3G training facility that will be made available for community use at Abercarn Primary School.

- 5.19 With the above significant 3G provision and following the opening of the CVL it will be possible to accommodate all current 3G pitch bookings at alternative facilities if use of the 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith were to cease. Whilst the Sport and Leisure service would use best endeavours to meet the requests of users it is not possible to guarantee that all bookings could be transferred on a like for like basis in terms of time and day of the week.
- 5.20 Closing the leisure facilities and 3G pitch would render the site surplus to requirements. Any decision as to what will then happen to the site will be subject to a separate future decision.
- 5.21 A consultation exercise was undertaken from Monday 20 November 2023 to Wednesday 3 January 2024 regarding the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The purpose of the consultation was to gain an understanding of the impact of the proposal on key stakeholders including previous and current users of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch and to understand any identified negative impacts.
- 5.22 The consultation was widely promoted including targeted stakeholder groups (including current users of the 3G provision/local sports clubs). Residents were encouraged to give their views in a variety of ways including online and hard copy surveys and online/face to face drop-in sessions. 307 completed surveys were received by the closing date and 16 individual members of the public in total proactively attended the online/face to face drop in sessions to discuss the proposal.
- 5.23 By far, the largest group of people to respond to the survey were previous users of the leisure centre and local residents. 79% said they were previous users of either the leisure centre or 3G pitch. The largest number of users visited the site "weekly" during this time and the main mode of transport to the site was car (75% used their car and 23% walked).
- 5.24 35% of previous users have used another CCBC leisure centre or sports facility while the centre in Pontllanfraith has remained closed. 21% have used another privately run leisure facility. 31% have not accessed sport and leisure facilities during this time - distance to alternative facilities (not being able to walk to alternative sites) was the main reason given. Other facilities not suitable to needs/preference to use Pontllanfraith and capacity at other facilities were also reasons. 130 respondents to the survey are current users of the 3G pitch at Pontllanfraith. 67% visit the site weekly, 20% visiting a few times a week. The



main mode of transport to the site was the car. 25 people said that they currently walk to the site. 98 use a car.

- 5.25 74% of respondents to the survey felt the proposal would have a negative impact, 26% felt that the impact would be neutral or positive. Reasons given for neutral or positive impact were that other facilities within CCBC would allow residents from any area a choice, are of a better quality/more modern (including CVL); Exercise outdoors so not reliant on the facility; the centre has been closed for some time, welcome a new facility
- 5.26 The main reasons given for feeling that the closure will have a negative impact were:
- Distance to alternative provision (beyond the CVL), increased travel distance, time and costs / other sites are not on public transport routes.
  - Too few sport and recreation facilities generally across the borough to meet current demand and growing population. Fewer facilities will have a negative impact on health and well-being
  - Lack of availability of facilities during the day
  - Shortage of 3Gs at weekends and in the winter
  - Size of the new 3G pitch for competitive matches and capacity at alternative sites
  - Questions over suitability of CVL sports hall for badminton and other sports, noted the lack of gym.
- 5.27 The majority of respondents live within a 5 or 10 minute drive from the current site but some users of the existing site travel from further afield and a number of other 3G sports pitches also fall within 10 minute drive from the current site.
- 5.28 A number of older respondents to the survey, some respondents with children, as well as those with disabilities, felt that they would be more negatively affected due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. Comments were also raised that women's sports may be impacted more if there is a limited capacity to book facilities, and that the CVL site needs to be accessible for those with disabilities.
- 5.29 In terms of mitigation of the impacts identified, some respondents commented that the site should simply be kept open. Suggested mitigation included:
- Consider the difficulties and cost associated with travel to other sites
  - Ensure alternative provision locally: classes and opportunities to use the hall at the new CVL site
  - Temporarily open the existing site until the alternative is available
  - Replace the current 3G pitch (with like for like) in the local area

- To meet demand:
    - ensure that 3G pitches across the borough are made available at weekends and during school holidays.
    - build more 3G pitches on current grass pitches that currently don't get enough use due to poor weather.
    - change the allocations system to ensure grass roots teams can access pitches
    - ensure that those using the current pitch are allocated other provision
- 5.30 Some respondents to the consultation commented they felt there would be a negative impact due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. The 23% of respondents who said that they walk to the existing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre will have the opportunity to make use of new facilities at the CVL outside of school hours. 75% responded that they travel by car to use the existing facilities, and the majority of respondents live within a 5 or 10 minute drive from the current site, but some users of the existing site travel from further afield. As illustrated in 5.33 there are a number of alternative facilities within 10 minutes' drive of the existing site.
- 5.31 The ability to book alternative facilities such as the new 3G pitch and sports hall at the CVL will serve to mitigate some of the impacts identified by respondents in relation to capacity. In addition, current bookings at Pontllanfraith will be supported to transfer to alternative facilities with capacity being maximised further with the management of the 3G and sports hall at Islwyn High school having been taken over by Sport and Leisure Services in December 2023 and is now fully available for weekend and evening bookings.

## Conclusion

- 5.32 The indoor leisure facilities at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre closed as result of the UK National lockdown in March 2020 and, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, have not re-opened for leisure use since, with previous block bookings being relocated to other facilities across the county borough. The existing leisure centre has significant outstanding maintenance liabilities, is not energy efficient, is not DDA compliant and does not meet the aspirations set out in the Sport & Active Recreation strategy 2019 – 29 of providing modern, fit for purpose leisure facilities.
- 5.33 The 3G football pitch is coming to the end of its lifespan and requires regular and ongoing repairs to ensure it remains safe for community use. The cost to replace the facility based on a 2022 report is estimated at approximately £280,000.
- 5.34 The Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL) development provides an option to replace the majority of facilities within the existing leisure centre with a modern,

fit for purpose offer that will also the help the Council meet its ambition in relation to carbon reduction.

- 5.35 The CVL will also offer a 3G facility, however it is acknowledged that the new offer will be smaller and only suitable for training purposes and not competitive matches. Most competitive matches are played on weekends, and as such can be relocated to alternative facilities such as Islwyn High School or Blackwood Comprehensive School.
- 5.36 74% of respondents to the public consultation felt the proposal would have a negative impact. The negative impacts identified principally centred around increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities and concerns around the capacity and availability of those alternative facilities. Those impacts are mitigated by the provision of new facilities at the CVL and the availability of a range of alternative facilities a short distance away:

<b>Facility</b>	<b>Distance from Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre</b>	<b>Travel Time by Car from Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre</b>
Newbridge Leisure Centre	3.3 miles	9 minutes
Sue Noake Leisure Centre, Ystrad Mynach	3.1 miles	9 minutes
Heolddu Leisure Centre	5 miles	14 minutes
Islwyn High School	3.1 miles	7 minutes
Blackwood Comprehensive School	2.3 miles	8 minutes
Caerphilly Leisure Centre	7.5 miles	16 minutes
Markham Community Leisure Centre	4.2 miles	10 minutes
Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Fleur de Lys	2.2 miles	5 minutes
Lewis School, Pengam	3.1 miles	9 minutes
Y Cwmpawd – Centre for Vulnerable Learners	0.0 miles	0 minutes

- 5.37 Closing Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and the associated 3G pitch permanently is consistent with the Council's Sport and Active Recreation Strategy and the Mobilising Team Caerphilly principle of doing things differently. The case for closure is made in view of the need to invest significantly in the existing facilities

to sustain their use let alone bring them up to current standards when there are new, alternate, and modern facilities available on the adjacent site and nearby. Additionally, these modern alternate facilities can be operated far more efficiently than the existing as they are located on joint use sites with schools. These proposals support the Corporate Plan and the Council's Placeshaping plans.

## **6. ASSUMPTIONS**

- 6.1 As indicated in the report, a number of the financial figures are estimates. The completion and opening date for the Centre for Vulnerable Learners is based on current project projections.

## **7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 7.1 Feedback from the consultation exercise was used to further develop the Integrated Impact Assessment. Older people and those with children as well as those with disabilities felt that they would be more negatively affected due to the increased distance and associated cost if they have to travel further to alternative facilities. 75% of respondents drive to the existing leisure centre and there are a range of alternatives within 10 minutes' drive of the site. The provision of a new sports hall and 3G pitch at the adjacent CVL offers further mitigation.
- 7.2 There was also concern that women's sports may be impacted more if there is a limited capacity to book facilities. As detailed in this report, there will be significant alternative provision with the completion of the CVL and availability of other facilities nearby. It was also stated that the CVL site needs to be accessible for those with disabilities and the new facility is being designed and built in accordance with Sport England standards that provide modern accessibility standards. The existing Leisure Centre does not currently meet these standards.

### **Link to IIA**

## **8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The annual revenue budget for Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch is £181,573. It became more expensive to run following closure of the adjacent secondary school in 2016 with the ending of a joint user virement of circa £26,000 from Education (as a result of the Leisure Centre previously being classed as a joint use centre located on a school site) following closure of the school. Also, a new rating valuation following the school closure resulted in an increase in non-domestic rates of £17,000.
- 8.2 As detailed above, there is a maintenance backlog estimated at £476,159, based on a condition survey undertaken in 2019. Using our most recent cost

estimates the backlog maintenance works are estimated to total £736,552. This does not take into account any adaptations which took place in connection to the mass vaccination centre, further deterioration since 2019 or recommissioning costs of the building. The 3G football pitch was installed in 2011 and is at the end of its lifespan and replacement costs are approximately £280,000 – although this does not include a review of the current 30 year old substructure that will require investigation. Some consideration may also need to be given to changing room provision if the 3G pitch facility were to be retained.

- 8.3 As stated above, apart from some very limited use of the sports hall for a short period, the indoor sport and leisure space has not been in use since the national lockdown in 2020 and has for a significant period been utilised as the county borough's Mass Vaccination Centre. The majority of equipment in the Fitness Suite has either been relocated to other leisure centres or taken out of use to support ongoing maintenance and repairs across the other leisure centres. This would need to be purchased at a cost of approximately £60,000 - £80,000.
- 8.4 The likely savings between operating the CVL facilities in comparison to running the leisure centre will be determined upon developing the delivery model and clarifying the scope of public interest and the range of opening. Energy cost considerations are difficult to determine at this moment in time. It is proposed that there will be an agreement between Sport & Leisure and the CVL (Education) to reimburse the school for out of school hours usage with the facilities managed by Sport & Leisure – this will be covered by a Joint User agreement that sets out agreed areas of responsibility in support of ensuring appropriate community use.
- 8.5 In summary, whilst the annual revenue costs of operating facilities for community use at the CVL are not known currently they will be significantly less than the current annual budget for Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre of £181,573. New equipment would be required to reopen the Fitness Suite at a cost of approximately £60,000 - £80,000. Replacement costs for the existing 3G pitch which is at the end of its life are at least £280,000. In addition, the existing leisure centre has an estimated £476,159 maintenance backlog.
- 8.6 Closing the leisure facilities and 3G pitch would render the site surplus to requirements. Any decision as to what will then happen to the site will be subject to a separate future decision. The site may be marketed for sale, and any potential capital receipt would be dependent on a number of variables including whether the Council cleared the site before marketing or whether it sold the site in its present condition. Assuming that a decision is made to permanently close the leisure facilities and 3G pitch then a separate report will be submitted regarding the potential options for the site post closure.

## **9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 There is one member of staff contracted to Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre who is currently seconded to another role elsewhere within the service. The delivery

of community-based sporting facilities from the Centre for Vulnerable Learners will require a staff resource. Any changes that impact on staff will be in accordance with relevant HR policies and in consultation with staff and Trade Unions as appropriate.

## **10. CONSULTATIONS**

- 10.1 The consultees listed below have been consulted on this report and their views have been incorporated accordingly.
- 10.2 Following Cabinet approval on 15th November 2023 a public consultation regarding the proposal that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre remains closed permanently and that use of the existing 3G pitch ceases once the 3G pitch at the new Centre for Vulnerable Learners is open for community use. The purpose of the consultation was to gain an understanding of:
- the impact of the proposal on key stakeholders including previous and current users of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and 3G pitch.
  - Where respondents identify a negative impact of the proposal, to understand their reasons and to identify mitigation to reduce that impact.
- 10.3 The consultation period ran from Monday 20 November 2023 to Wednesday 3 January 2024 and was widely promoted including targeted stakeholder groups (current users of the 3G provision/local sports clubs). Residents were encouraged to give their views in a variety of ways:
- Survey – online, hard copies available
  - Face to face engagement – 4 drop-in sessions held within the Pontllanfraith ward plus 2 online sessions
- 10.4 307 completed surveys were received by the closing date, and 16 individuals in total proactively attended the online/face-to-face drop-in sessions to discuss the proposal in further detail. The full consultation report on is included at Appendix 2.
- 10.5 The Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre report was considered by the Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 11th February 2025.

One Member queried if dealing with the maintenance backlog would improve customer service. The Member also requested more detail on the proposed community offer from the Centre for Vulnerable Learners (CVL). The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services highlighted that the backlog was based on an estimate and reminded Members about the age of the building under discussion. This was contrasted with the adjacent CVL which met modern building standards. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager outlined some of the facilities included at the CVL such as a 4-court sports hall which met Sport England standards, a Climbing Wall, and a small 3G training pitch.

A Member requested information on the Integrated Impact Assessment and how findings could be mitigated. The Member also questioned how closing a

Leisure Centre was in keeping with the Council's Sports and Active Recreation Strategy (SARS). The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services advised that consultation did identify some potential negative impact such as increased travel distances for users. Members heard how 75% of users drove to the existing venue and that this would still be the case with alternative provision. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager outlined to Members that since its inception in 2019 SARS had been responsible for almost £4M of investment in leisure facilities across the County Borough. The new Hockey Hub in Ystrad Mynach and the Oakdale Athletics Hub were given as examples. It was also highlighted that one of the aims of the SARS was to increase physical activity, but that this was not centred solely on Leisure Centres. It was also highlighted that the strategy did envisage the rationalisation of facilities due to the ongoing financial challenges.

One Member highlighted that this was the third time that the Council had tried to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre. The Member observed that a decision had been deferred following legal advice and that we were now responding to the outcome of a Judicial Review. He outlined how the report only gave detail on the one aspect where the Council conceded and did not mention the other five grounds for the review. The Member then questioned the cost in legal fees associated with trying to close the facility and the merit of continuing in such a way. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services responded that the cost would be provided outside of the meeting. He also advised Members that the Council only accepted one of the grounds on the decision-making process and had taken the pragmatic view that it would be better to ask Members to reconsider their decision, in light of this, rather than pursuing the matter further as part of a legal process. The Member highlighted that the Pontllanfraith 3G pitch is the only one to meet the Gwent County Standard and he questioned if it was regularly closed on Saturdays, the usual matchday. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager advised that it had not been closed deliberately to avoid activity on Saturdays but conceded that it might have been closed occasionally and that he would clarify this position. The Member questioned the suitability of the proposed alternative 3G pitch at the adjacent site. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager recognised that this pitch did not meet the Gwent County Standard, but he highlighted the high level of investment in the 3G pitch portfolio across the County Borough.

A Member wished to know the impact of closing the indoor facilities in 2020, in terms of usage, at other Leisure Centres across the County Borough. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager advised that last year the usage figures were 1.9 million and it was forecast that this rate would reach over 2 million users this year.

One Member wished to know what had happened to the staff working at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager advised Members that one member of staff had retired and that the two other staff members were redeployed within the Council.

A Member queried if the CVL facilities would only be available to users outside of school hours and also questioned the lack of gym facilities. The Sport and

Leisure Facilities Manager gave details on the arrangements for community use outside of school hours at schools and advised that the proposal would not have a negative impact on other leisure facilities.

One Member raised the remaining five grounds for the Judicial Review and wished to know how the proposal would now proceed. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services gave details on the five grounds and reminded Members that only one, relating to the Council's call-in procedure, had been accepted and that this was the reason for the report currently under discussion. The Monitoring Officer then advised that every Council decision was potentially open to Judicial Review. He outlined that a future Executive decision could face a similar challenge and reminded Members that the Court was not making a judgement on whether it was right to close a leisure centre in this instance. It was view on how the Council has taken its decision. The Member wished to know if there was a future Judicial Review would it have to start afresh or continue proceedings. The Monitoring Officer advised that should there be a future challenge to any future decision resulting in a Judicial Review it would result in a new review process.

A Member asked if users of the Pontllanfraith 3G pitch would be accommodated at other similar sized 3G pitches available within the County Borough. The Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager advised the Member that this would be the case.

One Member asked if a Community Asset Transfer for this site would be appropriate under the Council's strategy if the closure of the leisure centre went ahead. The Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services outlined that a decision on the future of the site was separate to the one proposed, he also suggested that a Community Asset Transfer was an option for any asset subject to the Council's disposal policy and highlighted the substantial maintenance liability and running costs at Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre which would be a key consideration for any prospective future operators.

- 10.6 When consulted on this report Councillor Shane Williams, Vice Chair of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee responded with the following comments:

I want to reiterate what I said previously, that the closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre will have a devastating impact on the local community, access to sport and fitness for many will be made more difficult, whilst the loss of the 3G pitch will mean many teams having nowhere to play.

Furthermore, its closure is based on a false premise.

Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre was one of the best used leisure centres and the 3G pitch is still in so much demand.

Whilst reference has been made to those clubs who were able to block book, like Oakdale Badminton Club, no reference has been made regarding the negative impact on casual users who have not been accommodated elsewhere.



And there is no reference either, to other clubs like Blackwood Netball, who have repeatedly highlighted the negative impact this has had on their club.

The loss of the 3G pitch, will mean more teams will be displaced much further away from their home, whilst for some, there will be no prospect of them being able to fulfil fixtures. Its full impact on these clubs should not be understated.

It is also disingenuous to keep referring to the CVL's MUGA as a suitable alternative when it is a fraction of the size and cannot hold competitive fixtures.

The MUGA is not a suitable or acceptable replacement for the teams that will be displaced if this closure goes ahead. I note it is now accepted in the report, that not all teams will be able to fulfil match day fixtures elsewhere. That must be a concern.

I also again question the suggested maintenance costs and note no reference has been made to the money spent on Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre just before it was used as a vaccination centre.

Furthermore, it is also contradictory to keep justifying this closure as part of the Sports and Recreation Strategy.

The SARS stated there would be a focus on just four strategic leisure centres. Because it was deemed that Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre is not one - despite neighbouring Blackwood being the borough's principal town – then we are told, it must close.

However, the investment and support for Sue Noake in Ystrad Mynach, which is now the location for hockey, or new 3G pitches at St Cenydd and Bedwas, completely contradicts the Strategy, as none of these are strategic sites.

I want also to repeat the concerns I expressed at Scrutiny, that the council, having lost one judicial review, now have had to concede another. That is deeply troubling. Troubling, not just in terms of how much in legal fees it keeps costing the authority, but also, how these decisions to close the leisure centre keep being made unlawfully.

Finally, this is a highly popular and much needed facility, and its future should be safeguarded.

Yet despite overwhelming opposition to its closure and despite losing one court case, and conceding another, it seems there is a determination to close this centre at all costs.

Given that determination, and at a time when more local communities are being asked to run local services through asset transfers, then surely the option for an asset transfer of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre should be considered.

## 11. STATUTORY POWER

### 11.1 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976

Author: Robert Hartshorn, Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services

#### Consultees:

Councillor Chris Morgan, Cabinet Member for Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces  
Councillor Andrew Whitcombe, Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor Shane Williams, Vice Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor Mike Adams, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Councillor Patricia Cook, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Councillor Colin Gordon, Pontllanfraith Ward Member  
Richard Edmunds, Chief Executive  
Mark S Williams, Corporate Director for Economy and Environment  
Jeff Reynolds, Sport and Leisure Facilities Manager  
Jared Lougher, Sport and Leisure Development Manager  
Sue Richards, Head of Education Planning and Strategy and Programme Director Placeshaping  
Andrea West, Placeshaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager  
Robert Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer  
Lynne Donovan, Head of People Services  
Paula Beaman, Senior Accountant  
Stephen Harris, Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer  
Leanne Sykes, Deputy Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer  
Ryan Thomas, Planning Services Manager  
Ben Winstanley, Head of Land and Property  
Hayley Lancaster, Transformation Manager – Engagement  
Liz Sharma, Service Improvements and Partnerships

#### Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Artist's impressions of the Centre for Vulnerable Learners
- Appendix 2: Consultation Report

#### Background Papers:

- **Report to Cabinet 20th September 2017 – “Proposals to commence a consultation exercise to close Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting.**
- **Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 1st November 2017 – “Consultation with respect to the closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting**

- Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 12th December 2017 – “Outcome of consultation on the potential closure of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Cabinet 13th December 2017 – “The future of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny Committee 18th January 2018 – “Consideration of call-in request – Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Cabinet 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre – Consideration of the call-in in the context of the leisure review” and relevant minute of meeting.
- Report to Cabinet 14<sup>th</sup> November 2018 – “Draft Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2019-29” and relevant minute of meeting
- Report to Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.
- Report to Cabinet 10th April 2019 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.
- Report to Cabinet 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and Link to meeting and relevant Minute.
- Report to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023 – “Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre” and relevant Minute.
- Report to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024 – Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and Link to meeting and relevant Minute.
- Report to Cabinet 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and Link to meeting and relevant Minute.
- Report to Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee 11th February 2025 – Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre and Link to meeting